

PS/Letwin

When Baroness Neville-Rolfe and Mr Letwin spoke on Monday 14 September about the Post Office, Baroness Neville-Rolfe explained that she was meeting Mr Arbuthnot the following Thursday (17 September) and would update Mr Letwin following that meeting. Mr Letwin wanted to know Mr Arbuthnot's reaction to the idea of a review by Mr Tim Parker, new Chairman of the Post Office, which he agreed with Baroness Neville-Rolfe was a good way forward.

Mr Arbuthnot's main ask was for Baroness Neville-Rolfe to agree to meet Second Sight, the firm of forensic accountants who had been employed by Post Office to look into the Horizon IT system and the cases that had been brought forward by individuals to the mediation scheme. Mr Arbuthnot felt this would help the Minister understand the issue better, and was only fair to hear their side of the story having had briefing from Post Office experts and the sub-postmasters. Baroness Neville-Rolfe agreed to consider this, and officials are considering options.

Mr Arbuthnot and Baroness Neville-Rolfe agreed that the Criminal Cases Review Commission's investigations would be important and should be allowed time to conclude, although Mr Arbuthnot raised doubts about whether the CCRC would resolve the issue if there was a finding in favour of the Post Office. The main case in his constituency, that of Mrs [?], is before the CCRC and was not the subject of mediation as she had already been found guilty in court of false accounting which he feels was unjust.

Mr Arbuthnot informed Baroness Neville-Rolfe that he planned to make his maiden speech in the House of Lords on this subject.

On the review, Mr Arbuthnot had some concerns that Mr Parker, as the new Chairman of the Post Office, might not be sufficiently objective to provide independent scrutiny. He suggested an alternative would be former Court of Appeal judge Sir Anthony Hooper, who previously chaired the Working Group on this matter. Baroness Neville-Rolfe said she would consider meeting him but noted that he had previously refused to meet Ministers on this subject when he was in post as independent Chair.

BIS are considering next steps including whether Baroness Neville-Rolfe should meet Second Sight. Baroness Neville-Rolfe still expects Mr Parker to consider this matter when he starts his role next week, and looks forward to hearing his views. Baroness Neville-Rolfe will reply to Mr Bridgen's email shortly along the lines attached.

The Government's position is that the processes already in train (CCRC investigations; remaining mediations; Mr Parker's review) should be allowed to complete before any further action is considered, and that many of these issues can only be resolved through the proper judicial channels.

As this is potentially a serious problem for the Government, Baroness Neville-Rolfe would appreciate Mr Letwin's view before she writes.

With thanks

Harriet Smith
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